DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 246 CS 511 448

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TITLE	Perfect Match. PEN.
INSTITUTION	Primary English Teaching Association, Marrickville (Australia).
SPONS AGENCY	Spencer Foundation, Chicago, IL.
REPORT NO	PETA-PEN-134
ISSN	ISSN-1442-603X
PUB DATE	2002-07-00
NOTE	7p.; Support provided by the Spencer Foundation Practitioner Mentoring and Communication Grant Scheme as administered by the University of South Australia.
AVAILABLE FROM	Primary English Teaching Association, P.O. Box 3106, Marrickville, New South Wales 2204, Australia. Tel: (02) 9565 1277; Fax: (02) 9565 1070; e-mail: info@peta.edu.au; Web site: http://www.peta.edu.au.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Action Research; Case Studies; *Classroom Techniques; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Literacy; *Reading Material Selection; *Sustained Silent Reading
IDENTIFIERS	Australia; *Strategy Training; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

A teacher had always allowed 20 minutes for silent reading in her classroom. But when she looked at her Year 3/4 composite class, she noticed that although some students were reading, some were not. She decided to explore why they might not be reading. She focused on three students--a boy with severe learning difficulties and an auditory processing problem, another boy with dyslexia, and a girl who had trouble making decisions and staying on task. Although they all claimed to enjoy reading, all three had trouble staying on task during silent reading time. The teacher found that these students and their peers needed to be taught quite explicitly how to choose a text of high interest at the right reading level, since this skill did not just "happen." This publication provides information on developing text-selection strategies in students, using the following approaches: applying understanding to individual students; looking carefully at the characteristics of texts children are asked to read; and applying knowledge of what constitutes literacy and how it is learned. The document describes the range of tasks the class participated in that supported these approaches: Me in a nutshell; Reading survey; Discussion of texts that students like and dislike; Sorting of texts; Y-charting what choosing a book should sound, feel, and look like; Y-charting what a reading session should sound, feel, and look like; Brainstorming text-selection strategies; Conferencing; and Sharing with peers. It then discusses a new approach to reading time, assessment activities, and how this action research project helped the teacher to fine-tune her reading program. (NKA)

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PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING ASSOCIATION PETA

Perfect match

REBECCA CLEMENTS

I'd been teaching for five years, and I always allowed 20 minutes for silent reading. Then, half way through term 1, I looked at my Year 3/4 composite class and thought: some students are reading, but many are not.

Some students were browsing the walls; others were staring remotely at their pages; still others were merely flicking pages and showing little engagement. As much as I loved the 'break' from teaching — and it was good to hear the odd student read and to read myself — it seemed most of my students weren't reading for enjoyment or for any other purpose. I couldn't escape the thought: what a waste of 20 minutes' learning time!

I started to take more notice of what this class was reading — or not reading — and was horrified. I found that students were just picking up any old book and having a go at it. Some books were of no interest to them; others were well outside their reading ability level. Some students could not comprehend any of the text they'd chosen.

I had assumed — wrongly — that a Year 3 or 4 student should be able to choose a suitable book and read silently for 20 minutes. Now I had to ask myself some questions. Did the students have enough material to choose from? Did they know how to choose texts? Did I have texts of interest available? Did they enjoy reading? I started to explore these questions.

Selecting focus students

I decided to focus on three students. Arran was a boy with severe learning difficulties and an auditory processing problem. Nic was a boy with dyslexia. Natalie was a girl who had trouble making decisions and staying on task. While they were very different from one another, these students all had difficulty in selecting texts. In turn, they often moved off task during independent silent reading sessions. Both Arran and Nic had been identified as having literacy difficulties and were receiving additional support.

I knew that all three students claimed to like reading. During conferencing, Arran said: "Reading is okay because it fills in some time when I'm home and have nothing to do". Nic said: "I think it's great because it teaches me things". Natalie said: "Sometimes I think reading is boring but I also like it because I can find out about words and their meanings".

Although these comments about reading were positive, all three had trouble staying on task during silent reading time. I now believe that their reluctance to read stemmed from the fact that they found the books they chose difficult to decode and understand. Certainly, all three agreed that they found the books in our class "hard" and "boring".

It seemed that these students and their peers needed to be taught quite explicitly how to choose a text of high interest at the right reading level, because it had become obvious that this skill didn't just 'happen'.

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Developing text-selection strategies

From my observations in term 1, I decided that the main focus had to be around learning episodes, supported by explicit teaching, that would support all students to choose appropriate texts. Following on from Wille (1996), this involved the following approaches:

- applying our understanding of individual students: their interests and personal experiences; what they know, understand and can do as they read; and what they can be helped to try and do next
- looking carefully at the characteristics of texts we ask children to read
- applying our knowledge of what constitutes literacy and how it is learned.

The class participated in a range of tasks that supported these approaches:

- Me in a nutshell
- Reading survey
- Discussion of texts that students like
- Discussion of texts that students dislike
- Sorting of texts
- Y-charting what choosing a book should sound, feel and look like
- Y-charting what a reading session should sound, feel and look like
- Brainstorming text-selection strategies
- Conferencing
- Sharing with peers.

Me in a nutshell

I asked each student to complete this activity, in which they worked with the template shown in Fig. 1. I modelled this task by completing my own self-description. This task was designed to identify what each student liked and disliked so that I could gain a feel for the kind of texts I should locate for their reading. I kept a list of all students' interests so that I had topics to choose from when the opportunity came to order new reading material.

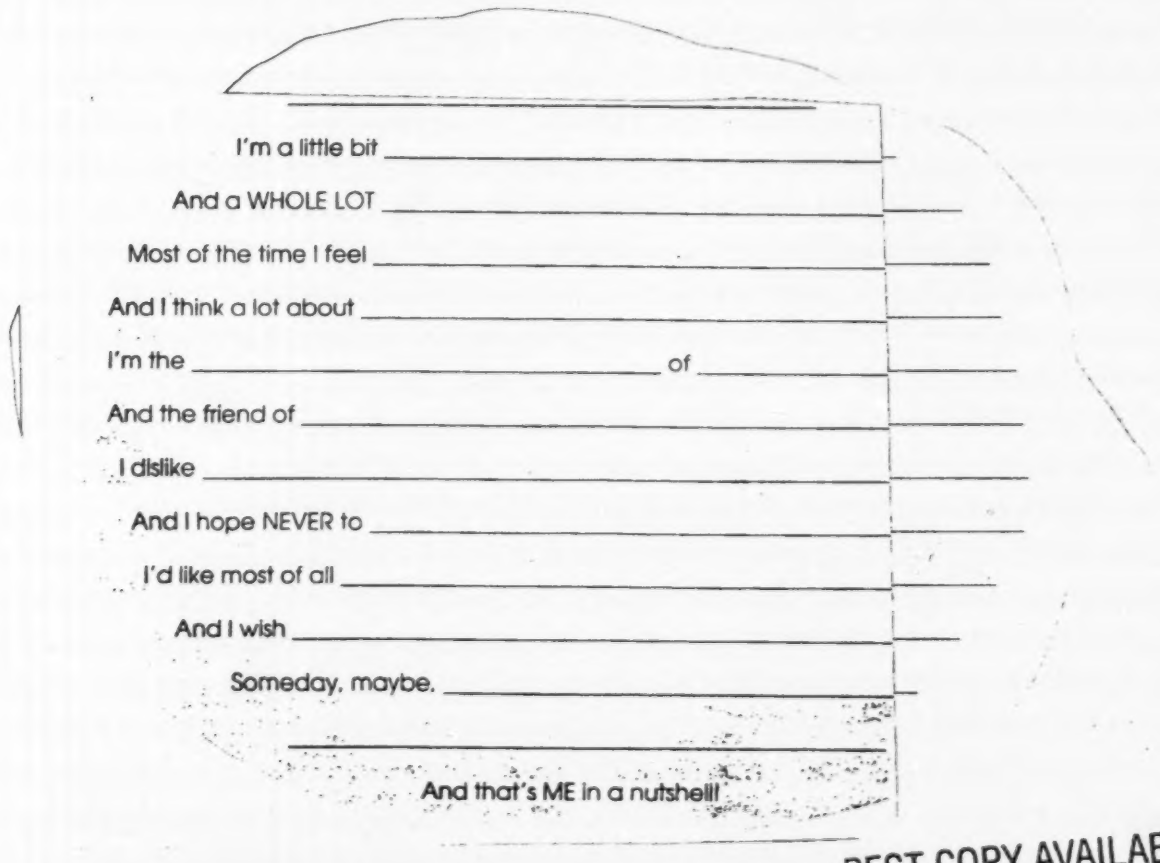
I'm a little bit _____
And a WHOLE LOT _____
Most of the time I feel _____
And I think a lot about _____
I'm the _____ of _____
And the friend of _____
I dislike _____
And I hope NEVER to _____
I'd like most of all _____
And I wish _____
Someday, maybe. _____
_____
And that's ME in a nutshell!

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Figure 1 The form used to guide students' self-descriptions.

Reading survey

This served as an extension to 'Me in a nutshell', giving me a feel for the types of texts that students preferred. In this activity, students completed the acrostic template shown in Fig. 2. I worked through each of the six prompt lines first, clarifying terms such as 'extracurricular' and making sure that students understood the intention of the last prompt (to identify an area of interest for which they would like to find more information).

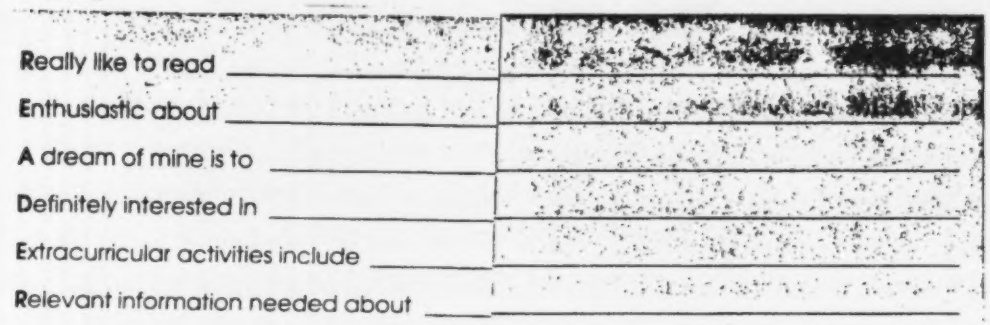

Figure 2 The acrostic prompt used to elicit survey responses from student readers.

Discussion of texts that students like

In a small group on the floor, I discussed the reading of texts with the focus group of three students. I discovered that all three liked to read novels. They also agreed that they liked adventure stories and folk tales (perhaps because we had been studying these text types). Nic, for example, said that he liked novels with some pictures, because "the pictures get my imagination working".

During this conversation it became apparent that the novels in the classroom were too difficult, but these students were trying to read them anyway. Natalie said that she enjoyed reading comics "because they're easier than novels". When I asked her why they were easier, she replied: "Because they have pictures that go with them". It was clear that visual clues were important in supporting these students' understanding of texts.

Discussion of texts that students dislike

Arran didn't like reading texts with "girls" stuff' in them, because he found them boring. Nic didn't like thin books because they didn't have chapters and were "too easy". Natalie didn't like "boring" books — she thought that books often began in an exciting way but then got boring after a couple of pages. All three confirmed that they didn't like choosing from the books in the classroom because they never picked the right one. It was, of course, hard to pinpoint what made a book 'boring'! But I now knew that I had to find more books of interest with illustrations or other visual references in them.

Sorting of texts

I looked closely at where the books in the classroom were located. I decided that I needed to change the whole system. I involved different student groups in classifying and sorting every book in the classroom into six crates: fiction and non-fiction at easy, medium and challenging levels. This took quite a while. To do it, the class had to develop a checklist that would guide their classification. We considered such things as page extent, print size, vocabulary, percentage of the page filled with print, number and type of pictures, and back-cover blurb. An Early Years publication (Education Victoria, 1999) provided a checklist that I followed. This list indicated that teachers should consider the supports and challenges provided to the reader in terms of:

- language — vocabulary, sentence structure, balance between 'natural' and 'book' language
- layout — spacing, print size, illustrations, paragraphing, organisational structure and text features
- content — sequence of events, links in main ideas, complexity of characters and concepts.

Source: Education Victoria (1999) *Early Years: Teaching Readers in Years 3 and 4*. Addison Wesley Longman, Melbourne.

I found that the successful readers could complete this sorting task confidently and enjoyably, and I found their decisions mostly accurate.

Y charting

I have found Y charts to be a useful mechanism for structuring students' thinking into categories. I decided that we could use Y charts as a focus for teaching the students how to go about choosing a text, and then on knowing how to read it. The following diagram (Fig. 3) illustrates the class's thoughts on both issues.

Figure 3 Y charts representing students' collated thoughts about the processes of reading and choosing a book.

These Y charts went up on the wall where the students could reflect on them when they were unsure about the selection of a book, or how to behave during reading time.

Brainstorming text-selection strategies

With these learning experiences behind them, students were now ready to brainstorm some of the strategies that they could apply when choosing books. This was a whole-class activity in which I was particularly mindful of the three focus students.

Several students provided input, and we came up with a good class list. The three focus students attended closely without providing input of their own.

How to choose a good book

1. Read the blurb.
2. Look at the books in a series that you like.
3. Look at interesting covers.
4. Flick through the book — make sure it is challenging but not hard.
5. Read a couple of pages.
6. See how thick the book is.
7. Choose a topic that interests you.
8. Read the title.
9. Does it have interesting pictures or no pictures?
10. Is it fiction or non-fiction?
11. Get a recommendation from a friend.
12. Do the five-finger test: if you don't know five words on the first page, try a different book.

I went through each of these suggestions, demonstrating, modelling and explaining what each meant. Student feedback indicated the value of this explicit teaching; for example, Nic said: "Oh, now I know what a blurb is". As a class, we created a poster of these ideas that was displayed over the book crates.

Conferencing

Every week, I made sure that I got around to each student to discuss the text that s/he was reading. In these informal conferences, students told me why they chose the text, how it was going, what it was about and what they thought might happen next. Below is a transcript recording part of a conference that I had with Arran.

Rebecca	What book are you reading today?
Arran	*Googie Eyes*.
Rebecca	Who is the author?
Arran	Jayne Caruso.
Rebecca	Why did you pick this book?
Arran	The cover looked good, and it's a novel. I like reading novels now.
Rebecca	What's your favourite part of the book?
Arran	When the guy who wants to be a frog starts to jump around.
Rebecca	What do you think will happen next?
Arran	I'm not really sure … he might turn into one.
Rebecca	Have you seen the other new novels similar to this one?
Arran	Yes.
Rebecca	Nathan enjoyed *Never Hitch a Ride with a Martian*. Maybe you could try that one next.

The students genuinely enjoyed sharing this information with me, and I was able to suggest other texts if they wanted some help.

Sharing with peers

Once a term, I asked students to share the texts that they really enjoyed. This time often resulted in students asking one another if they could look through or borrow a particular text. It also produced a lot of discussion around different texts. As a result, students began to bring in their favourite novels, information books and magazines.

A new approach to reading time

With the support of the students, I evaluated the success of our conventional afternoon reading time. I decided that it would be more beneficial for the students to read first thing in the morning, when they were more focused and alert. This change also attracted parent helpers, who would wait for the morning bell to ring and then help students to select texts at need. Once all students were seated, the parents would simply move around, occasionally asking a student to read one or two pages to them and perhaps asking a question or two about the text. Most students were able to read aloud from their text and discuss it every day. This had never before happened in my class. Now that they knew they needed a text to read every morning, the students began to take responsibility for finding a suitable text, and were generally ready to read before the bell went. I noted that Natalie was particularly organised and on task on those mornings when her mother was able to stay.

Assessment

I assessed my students' development in the selection and reading of appropriate texts after we had cycled through these activities over ten weeks. I gathered data from:

- the reading survey
- written activities
- questioning about what students selected
- questioning about what students read
- conferencing
- listening to students' reading
- observation
- class discussion.

From these sources of data, it is clear that students are now more excited about reading, and about choosing their next text to read. They clearly enjoy reading aloud to parents, and to me. More students are choosing texts that match their interests and reading level, and there is evidence of improved comprehension. I have also noticed that students are selecting a wider range of text types.

About the author

Rebecca Clements teaches at Immanuel Primary School, Novar Gardens, Adelaide, South Australia. The composite Year 3–4 class that is the focus of this PEN was located in a smaller Lutheran school drawing on students with a significant range of abilities and experiences.

Acknowledgement

This text has been developed through classroom-based research conducted with support from the Spencer Foundation Practitioner Mentoring and Communication Grant Scheme administered by Barbara Comber at University of South Australia. The views in this paper do not necessarily represent those of the Spencer Foundation. Grateful thanks to the participants in this research, and to Anne Simpson for her thoughtful editorial work.

Reflection

This classroom action research has helped me to fine-tune my reading program. I can now teach more explicitly about what good readers do when they choose texts, and how they go about reading them. As I observe the three focus students, who are now on task during silent reading, I am convinced that it is important to teach students the skills of text selection. Extra parent help has been a significant factor.

I have noticed that Arran finds text selection a much easier process now that the books have been divided into crates. Whereas he would often leave his seat each lesson to swap books over, he now rarely moves once he has made his choice. Nic has come a long way with his reading. He enjoys the challenges of our short novels, and is able to select a suitable adventure story. I can honestly say that all students in my class are now using the 20 minutes of silent time to read.

In all, my local research has led me to conclude that:

- Year 3 and 4 students still need to be taught the skills of book-selection
- pre-sorting texts into levels and genres can help students' confidence when they are selecting reading material
- reluctant readers need to be exposed to a range of text types
- parents play an important role in a child's reading development.

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PO Box 3106 Marrickville NSW 2204 Tel 61 2 9565 1277
ISSN 1442603X Printing: Southwood Published by PETA, July 2002.

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